

# Middle East Research and Information Project

## "I Still Have a Realistic Expectation of Better Prospects for Egypt's Future"

by [Jessica Winegar \(/author/jessica-winegar\)](#)  
published in [MER281 \(/mer/mer281\)](#)

*Wael Eskandar is a Cairo-based independent journalist who blogs at Notes from the Underground. He has written for Ahram Online, al-Monitor, Daily News Egypt, Counterpunch and Jadaliyya, among other outlets. He has also contributed to Egypt's Kazeboon campaign and other projects that focus on youth and digital information. Eskandar spoke with Jessica Winegar, associate professor of anthropology at Northwestern University and an editor of this magazine, in April 2017.*

**We first met in 2016 at the "After Tahrir" conference at the University of California-Santa Barbara. You were one of the few activist participants still living and working in Egypt, and you seemed energetic. What are the challenges of activism for those in exile? To what extent does one's geographic location make a difference?**

My energy at that conference came from seeing that the Egyptian revolution is still remembered and considered to be of importance. That was encouraging; it made it all feel like less of a defeat than if the revolution had been completely forgotten and was of no consequence.

I still live in Egypt, which gives me a lot of insight into what is happening on the ground. I think the main struggle for activists in exile, or even analysts who don't visit Egypt often, is to understand the sentiment on the street and its exact context. It's not impossible—there are many in exile who are capable, but they need to do more work to authenticate information so as to produce accurate analysis.

In the case of activists, understanding the sentiment on the street is key to messaging and also to analysis of what needs to be addressed. In Egypt there are many layers of misdirection, propagated by numerous media outlets, so a strong filter needs to be applied. And that comes from being present, from knowing the right people and from having a lot of experience.

It's not simply about understanding facts; it's about understanding motivations. That is what makes geographic location an asset, at least with respect to topics that are not so straightforward.

### **Are you still energetic?**

I would say that I still have a realistic expectation of better prospects for Egypt's future.

I saw the hundreds who protested under [former President Husni] Mubarak turn into thousands. And most any young Egyptian who tries to find out the truth about politics will find revolutionaries to speak with, even if they seem to be defeated.

An older Coptic Egyptian academic who supports the regime [of the current president, 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi] once told me that in the 1970s you had to be pro-government, join the Islamists or bury yourself in books. He chose the books, but said that if he had a choice between Islamists and the military, he would choose the military. He saw no option of rejecting both types of authoritarianism. Yet I think that, as many in the younger generations grow up, they will see that they do have that other option—and that many of their fellow citizens also want to reject all forms of authoritarianism.

This entire view, however, is strongly challenged by the state of the world, as in numerous places there is a downward spiral into right-wing fascism. The right wing has been rising steadily in Europe, and with [Donald] Trump's election in the United States, a country that took pride in at least the rhetoric of human rights is now led by a president who has openly denied science and promoted racism. Together with the state of affairs in the Middle East, it is as if young people are being told that the bar is much lower, that we're now simply fighting for basic human decency—such as respect for others.

### **What roles do journalism and blogging play in activism in Egypt today?**

Arabic-language journalism in Egypt is nearly dead—at least in its traditional forms, such as newspapers and television. Yet there are many emboldened citizens who express their opinions and help to shape [public knowledge of the] facts. Such "speaking-truth-to-power journalists" persist in their efforts in a few alleyways on the Internet. There is no blogging in Egypt, in the sense of several blogs that are updated and maintained, but there are social media platforms that act like blogs. These blog-like things seem to be sources of information in a context where formal media is completely subverted.

### **How would you compare journalism and blogging to other forms of activism in terms of efficacy?**

Other forms of activism include organizing, campaigning and taking to the streets. These forms are better in the long run, but currently there is no public space for on-the-ground activism. And there is no energy to break through the barrier, which would take masses of people and not just a select few activists.

**In a January 25, 2017 article at *Open Democracy*, you wrote that many Egyptians are caught in fear and denial. How can fear have returned to Egypt when we all said, at the time of the 2011 uprising, that it had broken through the wall of fear? And what precisely are Egyptians in denial about?**

The barrier of fear was indeed broken through in 2011, but the Egyptian regime withstood the blow. There's a lot you can do [to rebuild the wall] when you have as many resources as the regime does.

The Muslim Brothers inadvertently did their part to bring back fear. Instead of progress toward a secular democracy that rewards competence, Egyptians were faced with a group obsessed with piety and control of personal space. [The Brothers' behavior when in power], of course, played into the Mubarak regime's portrayal of them for years as the ultimate bogeyman. But the Brothers did not understand the power of this stereotype and, in many an instance, they seemed to exert efforts to reify it. The military capitalized on this fear, the fear of violence and control in the name of religion, and pushed it even further.

People were not afraid of protesting when they gave up their right to protest; they were afraid of violence and economic hardship. So many people, prodded by the military, marched to give Sisi a mandate to fight probable terror. At first they cheered on that fight; then they realized that they would be figured as the so-called probable terror if they objected. And so, in effect, they willingly handed the keys over to the military and marched to start fearing again.

This is the exact story that many Egyptians are in denial about. They cannot cope with the fact that the military to which they handed power is a failure in handling the country's politics. They are willing to tell themselves that those who have been killed, tortured and imprisoned deserved it—rather than face the fact that the systematic brutal practices of the Egyptian regime can target anyone. Ask any Egyptian about the police, and he or she will tell you how corrupt, incompetent and brutal they are. But challenge the police in a political context, and the same person will claim that the police are protecting Egypt from terror, thus justifying what is already known about the

police's brutality.

**It seems there is a massive generational divide in Egypt in terms of support for the Sisi government and views of what is politically possible. Do you agree and, if so, what do you think has caused the divide?**

It's like the example I noted above: The older generation does not really see a choice other than the military and the Islamists, the two forces that have long contended for power. Many of them are so accustomed to the order of things that they are unable to cope with changes. For them, the events of 2011 are a source of confusion. They had been living in darkness for a very long time, and when some light came in, they were not able to process it.

Sisi restored the darkness that they're used to and the moral authority vis-à-vis the younger generation that they'd lost in 2011 and 2012. Not only can the older generation claim that their children do not understand the way the world works, but the Sisi regime will also lock up their children, proving that the older generation is right.

But I don't see the divide as strictly generational—it is more a war on the younger generation that dared to stand up to oppression and autocracy. The security state is exacting its revenge upon those whom it perceives dealt it a blow on January 28, 2011, the day that tens of thousands of protesters came into the streets in cities across Egypt and faced down the government's tanks and bullets. Most of the people who did that are youth.

**How do you manage the exigencies of daily life in Egypt while still keeping the future in sight?**

Survival, in any context, in any place, is important.

On January 24, 2011, there seemed to be no future. That was an error in judgment on the part of a great many, caused by the blinding darkness of the state of affairs at that moment. I have learned to read the present a bit more carefully and with a much less defeatist attitude to avoid that mistake that many of us made.

Yet presently the regime has given no guidelines for how to remain safe. Far too many innocent people are being targeted, for having done nothing, and so surviving is a matter of chance. Giulio Regeni is a case in point. [Regeni was an Italian Cambridge University doctoral student who was conducting research on trade unions in Egypt when he was abducted, tortured and killed in early 2016, presumably by Egyptian security forces. – Eds.]

The only way to continue is to accept that: Keep doing what you can and accept that injustices can happen to anyone. You may end up hurt or in jail just because some state security officer decided to take action against you because of some informer.

Yet how can we not also see the numbers of young students who are mobilizing every day, at least in terms of expressing their opinions rejecting the present rule? This is the future; just observing them keeps the future in sight.

**Do you think that the term "revolution" still applies to what happened in 2011 and what is happening now?**

I've always maintained that the January 25 revolution was an uprising that we name "the revolution." I have no doubt in my mind that it wasn't a revolution in the traditional sense of revolutionaries rising to power. It is an uprising that we all hoped would be a revolution. But maybe the fact that it is remembered to this day as a defining moment in Egyptian history (and perhaps world history) makes me believe that it is a revolution. It revolutionized so many minds and completely disrupted the political system in Egypt. The question is whether it is a successful revolution or not. In terms of politics, it has failed in the short term to bring about the changes it desired, and Egypt is presently in the worst era of human rights violations in its modern history.

Yet in terms of creating space out of nothing—like a big bang—with no resources and no organization and very little intent, then I would say it is a miraculous success.

Now all it has to do is evolve, but that's what I'm not yet sure will happen.

Filed under: